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interview with Danielle Brathwaite-Shirley by Flatness for *Feminist Review* and Women's Art Library, April 2021

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Shama Khanna and Danielle Brathwaite-Shirley

In March 2021, Flatness, a long-running fugitive platform for artists' moving image and network culture directed by Shama Khanna, met with Danielle Brathwaite-Shirley over Zoom for an in-depth conversation about her work, transcribed below. Danielle is a digital artist whose practice includes building websites as sites of empowerment, in particular for Black Trans people. Danielle discusses types of gatekeeping that determine value and erase the presence of Black people from archives, technologies and markets. Through her work, she seeks to create a foundation for other Black Trans people to build upon, including making archives where they are not only centred but embedded in the fabric of her coding. She also shares her research into piracy and her dreams of hijacking capitalist business models to divert money from corporate monopolies in order to claim back power for the disenfranchised. I was interested to ask her about interactivity and how through her online works—blacktransarchive.com, blacktransair.com and resurrectionland.com—she is creating an alternative to the censorship and passive aesthetic activism promoted by social media platforms. We also speak about her non-linear approach to technology, reviving technologies to repurpose them for use by Black Trans people, as well as how she emphasises accessibility in her work and the importance of setting out terms and conditions as a way of holding people (and gatekeepers) to account.

Flatness (Shama Khanna): Can you speak about how you manage to maintain a critical distance from social media?

Danielle Brathwaite-Shirley: I do a lot of work on making my own domains and my own infrastructure to host my work. For me, it's very important to take control over how you're hosting and showing your work online. Instagram is a way of putting some stuff out there, but I have blacktransarchive.com and resurrectionland.com as a way of creating a space for myself on the internet that isn't bombarding me with things I do or don't need to see and doesn't make me feel like I'm getting left out of anything. I like to control my navigation on the internet and how people navigate my work at the same time, away from

Instagram and away from social media, to see the work and actually be like no, the internet is not just these large social media conglomerates.

Flatness: So in comparison to the archives you're creating with Black Trans people, you're able to say that Instagram is an archive but it doesn't have your interests at heart.

Danielle: For me, Instagram isn't a great place to only host work because eventually when they decide to change the terms and conditions, or your account gets hacked or banned for any reason, then you've lost everything on there. So I'm interested in archives [in] that I have the control over how they are surviving and if they break down it's my responsibility to fix. Because if we don't have that, you won't have any control over how and when this erasure happens, and again you'll just be repeating this same kind of cycle of people trying to archive certain bodies or some conversations within a structure that is inherently going to erase them.

Flatness: I think my experience of social media is that I feel implicated by the immediacy and intimacy it creates. It feels as viewers we're being pulled out of a position of being passive.

Danielle: Sure. I'm trying to remove that kind of passive audience. I find that passive audience very difficult ... what's the word, disappointing, I'm disappointed how little people want to act now and how often they find themselves in a position where they think that when someone makes something they can consume it, without taking any responsibility or thinking further on it. And my practice is making people's choices matter within the work and their choices will determine how the work reacts to them.

Flatness: That blows my mind. I think this idea of interactivity, away from the gaming world at least, is so unusual. Do you also make films as well, or are all your works interactive?

Danielle: I've made a lot of films and animations that go with my works. So *Resurrection Lands* actually has a forty-minute animation that usually gets paired with it when it's shown [see Figure 1]. I actually got into making games by making films, so while a lot of my animations before had gaming elements in them where it looks like you could make a choice, you actually couldn't and it was already pre-planned and people just play it out.

Flatness: Gaming is such a new discussion in the art world; do you feel like we're playing catch-up or has it always been a part of your education?

Danielle: I mean games have always been part of my upgrowing. I think we all play games when we're younger, not just video games but games in general, and I feel that that kind of interactivity and play gets removed when you put it in the gallery because there's this seriousness, this intellectual idea of how art should be looked at and consumed. And that is usually informed by who's buying and who's letting what art be shown. Something about making games that can be shown online is that we get to take [all this] out of the galleries' hands. And they don't like that so now they're trying to jump in on that as well, trying to mint artworks online with NFTs [non-fungible tokens]. They're trying to get into this idea of what does it mean to have work that's interactive and digital and how you can sell it and how they can make money off it essentially. So I feel like the world is playing catch up in that sense. The world of games is a massive business and a big model that people look at. It's a very interesting model when you think about art in general, but the artwork was always informed by who was actually buying, selling and who's being let into the school and learning the skills and who's allowed to enter the spaces. A lot of NFT spaces are exclusively white because that's who is let in and gets the keys. Often it's invite only, and they're not

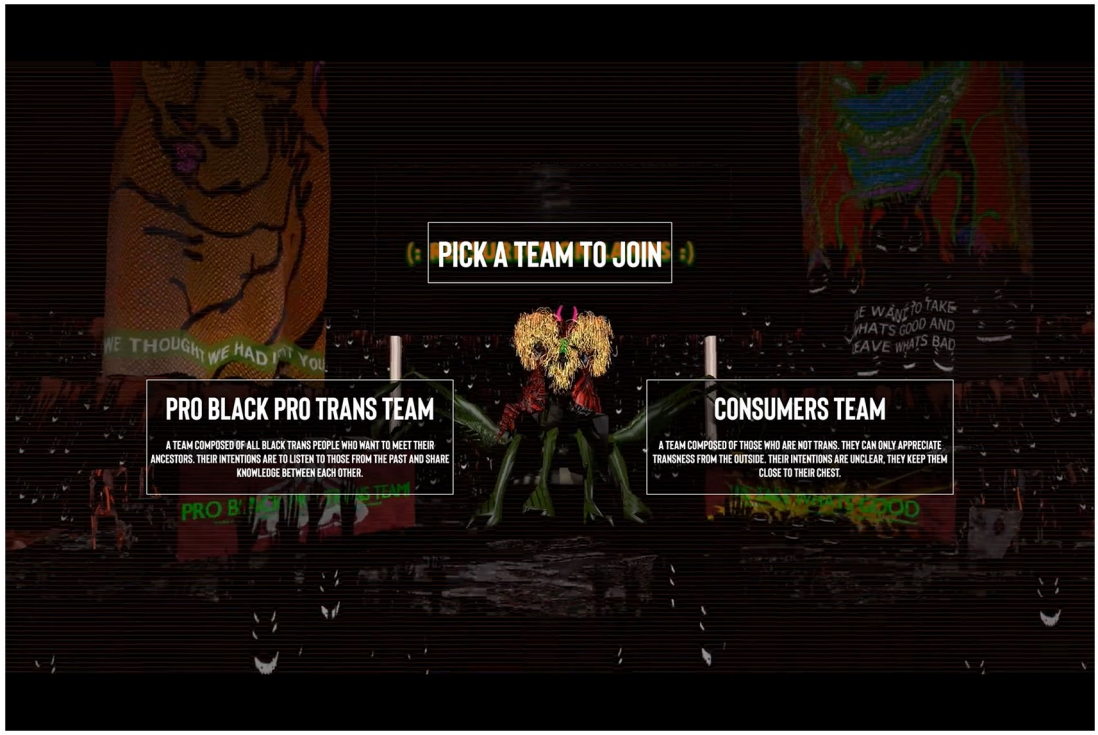
PICK A TEAM TO JOIN
PRO BLACK PRO TRANS TEAM
A TEAM COMPOSED OF ALL BLACK TRANS PEOPLE WHO WANT TO MEET THEIR ANCESTORS. THEIR INTENTIONS ARE TO LISTEN TO THOSE FROM THE PAST AND SHARE KNOWLEDGE BETWEEN EACH OTHER.
CONSUMERS TEAM
A TEAM COMPOSED OF THOSE WHO ARE NOT TRANS. THEY CAN ONLY APPRECIATE TRANSNESS FROM THE OUTSIDE. THEIR INTENTIONS ARE UNCLEAR, THEY KEEP THEM CLOSE TO THEIR CHEST.

Figure 1 *Resurrection Lands* (video still), 2020 by Danielle Brathwaite-Shirley
Source: Image courtesy of the artist

giving keys to Black Trans people or Black people in general. So a lot of gatekeepers make certain types of artwork more lucrative than others. And gaming hasn't been able to come into its own until now that people need to make work that's online and interactive. And there's a big interest in game engines so it's very interesting, but artwork is only changing because it has to.

Flatness: I'm interested in how you sell your work and how you can, to an extent, future-proof it or think about its conservation once it's out of your hands.

Danielle: Yeah. So currently I don't sell my archives. They're not for sale. They're something that wouldn't be right to sell. If I'm calling it an archive and I'm working with people to archive them; it's not right to sell any of that. I don't want anyone to have ownership of that. And so I haven't sold anything! I think there will be things in the future that I will sell if I can, but a lot of my work currently has been made with a mindset of actually archiving those around me. Having it in someone else's hands doesn't suit what the work was made for in the first place. So a different model of making money and selling work needs to approach me. I look at a lot of models like indie game studios as a way of making money, as opposed to selling the rights to art or painting. As for future-proofing, that's what we're looking into. We're looking into how we can essentially make these kinds of online internet works, and put them maybe onto a USB and create a box for them so that people can keep a box and it will work forever. It's very difficult. But we're also looking into how we could remaster things: when you have old video games,

and a new version gets made to play on the current systems. I'm really interested in what it looks like to remaster an archive. And what the Black Trans archive looks like when it's remastered.

Flatness: I've seen all of your work online. So I'm yet to behold your installations. Do you prefer one over the other?

Danielle: I am really influenced by old PS1 Nintendo 64 games. So for me, the work that goes into optimising something to run on a really bad system is really interesting to me. Making the textures very low resolution, making as small number of polygons as possible, making the file small [and] crunching things down, compressing things and still making it look very slick. I'm really interested in that, in those textured effects that you get when you have a video file and you crunch it down to work on everything. I'm very interested in making work that runs on a limited platform and currently the internet feels like a very limited platform space because you have all these limitations to it. I'm currently building a work on Unity to run off anything and it doesn't have the same limitations so you're putting in false limitations for yourself. But the Internet has very real limitations like if you create a 4K video and it's interactive you need time for it to buffer, so you're going to have to build in a backward buffering thing and you might have to split the video up into many pieces. And so a similar kind of optimisation strategy has to be approached when making different games or different films to run on the internet. If you're using films to make an interactive project, you have to think about completely different things. When you think about if you're using your browser to run a 3D programme. There's a completely different conversation to have on that.

Flatness: That's really interesting because I've written about how the rawness of your work is more to do with working at speed; or maybe it's both, would you say? Or you're not interested in something being high res?

Danielle: Yeah! I mean, a lot of my references are from the 1980s and 1990s. So I look at very early technology and this is because for me I don't see the limitation in technology at that time. I see the limitation in people who were using that technology, and it was usually just white men. And so I see this as untapped resources because essentially someone made an engine that ran a very particular game, or a very particular programme, but only white men put ideas into it, and then what came out was very specifically tailored to other white men. And so for me, I'm thinking okay if I approached that same technology back then, with the idea of thinking of it as a possible use of archiving and using the same techniques to tell a story that I want to tell now, what does that look like? And so my aesthetic often comes out nostalgic, because I'm actually looking at a nostalgic era of technology and video games that was much simpler than it is now. But also it's a kind of rally against a lot of internet art. A lot of digital art being made at the time that I was doing my art practice was like, slick, very soft, very feminine structures of—I don't know—globs of very pure beautifully made 1,000 million polygons, highly rendered just 3D stuff, you know, and made by men. And I hated all of that because none of it was interesting. It's the same; the men have the access to technology, and they use the technology to make something so beautiful but actually they don't say anything with it. And I'm more interested in being able to have a process that's quick enough to allow me to say exactly what I need to say.

Flatness: I'm wondering if there are any baby queers or baby Trans people who have been asking you how to do things? I guess that's the idea, right, that hopefully in the future this type of archiving will catch on?

Danielle: For me, I just feel it's important for people to do their own type of archiving. I don't think you need to do my type. I feel like every time I do a project, the way I do it is different because I'm working with different people. And for me, that process is very important: that you have to change how you're archiving people because not everyone's the same. And if you try and use the same format, you will inherently erase something about them. And that's not to say all the new formats you use will be perfect but you'd have to try and adapt and fit the structure and the architecture that the archive is even made on in the first place, to fit the group of people that you want to archive. So you have to take into account: who are they, what access do they have, how they want to be shown and who was accessing and things like this.

Flatness: How did you start working with other Trans people to archive them? And how have your techniques developed?

Danielle: Something I've always done is worked with people around me. When I was making animations, I always got people to do the voices and filmed the people that were around me. I replicated things that happened to us using animations to try and remember them. I used to use 3D environments as a diary just to write notes in. And so this kind of note-taking, this way of looking at 3D has never really been about the end result: it's been about the process of what gets put into it. And something I do often, which I've talked about before, is taking all these pictures of people and using them to make the ground, using the pictures to make the earth, the sky and everything. You wouldn't even know that there's a lot of references within the structure of the worlds—the digital worlds—I build. And so for me, making work, the process is who and how I'm working with a bunch of people. A work I'm doing now is a work in which I've motion-captured two Black Trans people who are dancing and I've used all those motions to map out these levels in an arcade game. All the movement is of them dancing, and how you interact with them changes how they dance and who's dancing and how the enemies dance and if you save the level or not, things like this.

Flatness: Amazing. And do you work to commission always or is it constant research and the commissions are just things that kind of bookmark your work?

Danielle: I'm always kind of working and usually either I approach someone and say I want to do this work: can you give me the money to make it? Or, someone says you can do this work, we want to give you this much money to put on a show … It doesn't really matter what the show is, I'll probably have a piece I'm already working on and that money will help fund that piece to get made. But something I always like to do is [ensure] that there's the installation piece for whatever it is, but then there's my personal domain that stays with me that anyone can access online. Resurrectionland.com is its own domain. Blacktransarchive.com: that's its own domain. And so I have these domains. These galleries are not the only place where you experience the work. The domain is where the work lives and the galleries get an installation version of that domain.

Flatness: Can you tell me about your current research into pirates?

Danielle: I came across this pirate podcast, and it talked about Black pirates and I was like, okay I'm interested in what this navigation of the sea was by these Black pirates, but there wasn't any information about that. But then I also found out that a lot of pirates were actually colonisers, and English genteel men: people who had official roles were actually doing the same thing as pirates were doing. And so this idea of pirates that we have is a very messed-up one. But there are also other accounts which talk about

the kind of communities they built on pirate ships. The ships would be run by their own particular community with their own particular rules everyone would sign up to: a very different ruling than you would have in any other land. So essentially, what you could have is if, at the time, there was a Black Trans pirate ship, you could have Black Trans rules which everyone followed and lived by. And so my new work about piracy, about the sea, is about this kind of lost history and lost understanding of how Black people navigated the sea. I call it 'wounds from the sea' because the sea is a moving body at all times and doesn't retain any history but so much history happens in the sea. It's 75 per cent of our Earth. And all of this history is washed away the instant it ends, and there are no traces to find, nothing to look back on and everything's eroded much faster than it can be remembered. And so for me, I'm really interested in reimagining navigation over the sea, and also our place in that writing over the histories and the narratives of peoples who travelled across the sea or were taken across the sea.

Flatness: That's so beautiful … Yeah, I've never thought of it that way or knew about this history. Are you connecting it to digital piracy and hacking?

Danielle: Oh yeah. When I was looking at pirates, I actually was researching fake scam companies who scam computers. And also I was looking at themed viruses: you can have these viruses now which are horror themed: as your computer is slowly destroyed they'll make these horror videos pop up like jump scares and your screen will fill with blood. They also have meme viruses that install a bunch of memes on your laptop or as your laptop dies it plays memes, but it's still destroying your computer. For me it was a really interesting way of thinking about piracy and claiming things back.

There are also a lot of crypto viruses. Essentially, they encrypt all the files in your computer and you have a certain amount of time to pay them in Bitcoin, until they delete all your files. And usually they have a little, like, creepy face that talks to you, like one had a pirate skull. They have themes to make what's happening even more scary than it already is. I'm really interested in using those ideas to ask and question how people can get reparations or take back items that were stolen from them, so I was making these fake pop-ups, which were based around stolen relics from colonisation. And so the pop-up, if you clicked on it, would, like, scam your computer and make maybe an institution give back a relic or accidentally loan out a relic to the country that it should be giving it to and never get it back. And so I was thinking about how we could use these ways that these fake helplines or these fake adverts you click on that actually install malware on your computer can actually be used to help give money to Black Trans people to help archive blackness, to take money back away from institutions or put them back into our hands. How can we essentially do that and what does it mean to install a malware on a computer that destroys it but at the same time gives information to those who need it? There's this case of someone who lived in a very poor country and he couldn't afford Wi-Fi so he wrote a virus that gave him the Wi-Fi from other people's computers. And that model of a virus is very interesting for me because it's a model that takes from people who have and gives it to those who haven't. And so it's a way of using viruses, not only to make money but also not enable people to opt out and have them opt into something they should already be opting into.

Flatness: You're working with Jacob V. Joyce and Ebun Sodipo and Tobi Adebajo, and I know Evan Ifekoya was one of your teachers at Slade. What does it mean to be surrounded by all these incredible practices?

Danielle: Great! It's great for me. We all think so differently and it's also so interesting to see how we approach similar things. For me, their practices don't come first, like, who they are comes first; those are people that have helped me through a lot, they're not just artists with a practice, they are community to me, you know, the reasons I make art in the first place. These are the people I think about as my

audience. And so it's not like the work is inspirational to me, it's the way they drive and the way they think and the importance they place on the things they do is something that becomes extremely crucial to me, and exciting for me because I see the value in words, through them, and through these kind of practices and how they speak to me and how we speak to each other. And also, when you have someone that talks about your work that doesn't have these questions or, like, transness or blackness, but can actually just talk about the work you're making, you get to make better work. And so for me they are people that I can ask very personal, very real questions about what I'm doing wrong and how I can make this better. Irrespective of the topics, and they will be like: what are you trying to do? This is not working, this is working. So for me it's a really amazing network of people to have to create work that actually does what I want it to do.

Flatness: Yeah, I agree with you entirely, it's like having an ethics around one's practice. I find in the art world, if I think too hard about it, it makes me value my practice less, because it's impossible to see myself [positively] through that lens. But yeah, like Evan is a close friend of mine and just their existence is so critical to my thinking and life in general. So, yeah, I'm very, very grateful to know all of you and your practices. And I hope what I'm doing with mine is effective. I'm thinking quite carefully about this. At the moment I'm working with [artist] Natasha Lall, and we're imagining Flatness as more of a collective or communal space. I've made it interactive but the interactivity hasn't really worked ...

Danielle: What do you mean the interactivity hasn't really worked?

Flatness: There is a comments feed and it's open, and I think my idea was that, you know, my role as a curator could be hacked. Anyone could take over the space, but nobody has. I've always felt so uncomfortable about being called a curator or with the power that it's meant to hold, and this was my way of saying it's not so much only my voice on here, it's all of the artists and the audience can join in as well.

Danielle: Yeah, something I've been doing with my recent talks is sharing it with someone else instead of just doing a talk about my work because I hate doing that now because I don't feel like I get much from it. I might do a talk with someone that I want to hear about their practice. So I did one with Ebun, about three weeks ago when we just got to talk about things that we just haven't had time to talk about. It was a really nice way of doing talks and that's how I'm approaching not centring myself within stuff, which felt uncomfortable, and instead just sharing the space. That becomes a much more interesting thing to watch in the first place.

Flatness: But you're so eloquent and you speak in such an accessible way about your work: you have so much clarity. I hope I'm not being condescending but it's quite unusual for an artist, dare I say it, a younger artist, to be such an authority on their work, but increasingly I understand it's something that you have to do as criticism has kind of died a death. Evan, for example, I love how they reach out about their work.

Danielle: I'm someone who loves people to rip my work to shreds. But I don't get that. And so often for me when I'm testing works out I don't test it with an art crowd at all, and I don't test it with just anyone: I test it with everyone. Everyone, anyone, because I need to know that it's accessible [and that] it speaks to anyone, anyone who picks it up can understand what it's doing and how to play it. But also is it interesting? Because the worst thing I'm scared of is making something boring. When I'm testing it on someone who doesn't know my practice and doesn't really care, they can tell you if it's shit or not. They'll tell you straight away. 'This doesn't work. Why is this here? I don't understand this. This is great,

this is terrible'. They'll tell you this from the heart, because they don't owe anything to you. I feel like sometimes we're in a kind of Instagram bubble dream. We get feedback that's always positive when actually we need feedback that's more constructive.

Flatness: I think most people would be really scared to ask anyone on the street what they thought about their work, but you're not just any artist, Danielle!

Danielle: I love getting ripped apart. It's so weird, I don't know, because of the school I went to ... but even they were quite nice. But I love being upset. I like it when someone says, 'I don't know if it's doing that'. I am not someone that thinks that I make masterpieces: I know that my work has flaws. That's why I'm continually making work because I need to try and fix those flaws or make something better. So when people give me feedback that helps me do that, I'm super happy. I feel very privileged and lucky to get that feedback because I want to do a better job and you're helping me do that.

Flatness: Are you interested in hauntology, or would you say your work is located more within Afrofuturist practice, or neither of these?

Danielle: I'm into things that anyone can understand. So for me, I'm into the kind of theory that Audre Lorde writes. I'm into theory that comes from experience, and is seen as theory and academic. For me, when I think of academic work I often think of text that is impossible to read. I don't want my work to be inaccessible. I want it to be very accessible. I want it to be so clear, you can't misconstrue anything or interpret something in the wrong way. As for any of those phrases: I'm not interested because I would have to read something to understand them. And it's not about me not wanting to study that. It's about saying that those kinds of phrases—those kind of ideas—leave the people out that they're talking about. I'm like, we can't have language that leaves the people they're talking about out. That's not how we need to work. We need to work on things that hold those and take into account the experiences of those we're actually talking about, so that they can add to it. Their voices are more important than the work we make. And so having their voices within the work, and having them see that reflection is more important than a theory or a new type of understanding of how to, like, hold Afrofuturism or something like that. If my mum doesn't understand the kind of work we're doing, we're doing something wrong.

Flatness: I guess, a devil's advocate response is like, you can see a lineage of Black artists that have come before who have been written about within hauntology and Afrofuturism, maybe connecting you to those practices—is that valid?

Danielle: I never thought about Afrofuturism because it wasn't something that I was studying or looking at or referencing when I was making my work. I was thinking about Black Trans people in the past—how they haven't been remembered—and needing to leave markers for them in the present so that there's something that people can reference back to in the future [...] That's something that I feel very strongly connected to, but I also feel like just calling it Afrofuturism—for me that's a genre that is quite specific, I don't think that every time a Black person makes work that's talking about an alternative space or an alternative world it's fair to say that's Afrofuturism and class it as such. For me that means that when a Black person makes Sci-Fi it gets classed into a limited field that is used to help other people understand why a Black person would make Sci-Fi. And that limits the scope within which we're allowed to do what we're allowed to do, and in what kind of conversations we're allowed because if all our kind of Sci-Fi narratives got termed 'Afrofuturism' that would become a saturated market. And only the best of the best would be seen. Something I like about Black work—and what I want to see more of—is us to be in all

the genres, not just the genre of Blackness [...] And so I like a more branched-out idea and look upon the work before it's cast into a very specific genre, without even consulting if the artist is doing that or not.

Flatness: How do you feel about this interview for the Women's Art Library, *Feminist Review* and Flatness?

Danielle: How do I feel? I don't know what you mean.

Flatness: As a way of kind of conserving the project? I wondered because you've been doing so many interviews, if it's important that this documentation exists of your work, or if it's just, yeah, a way of surviving?

Danielle: I think I'm the wrong person to ask, because I don't care about my own voice. I am much more interested in hearing others. This is why my practice is based around other people. Like I'm much more interested in archiving how my friend Marikiscrycry moves than what I've got to say on how they move [...] My purpose in this world is to try and use the skills I have to archive other people and try and tell and interpret these stories into the kind of field I know I can do. I feel—like with everything I do—if it can't be used by someone else, either as some foundation to add upon or something to see themselves in, I don't think it's doing a good job. So, if this interview does that, that's great. But if it doesn't then I will be okay [...] I was talking to someone yesterday about trying to write about archiving and experience in an intellectual university: what does that mean for me? I was interested in that. So I'm not someone who's gonna be like 'yeah, speaking to me is great' [...] but my hope is that someone will hear it and say 'she's chatting nonsense. I can say what she wants to say way better', and then they'll say it way better and then someone else will look at that and say 'oh, that person is chatting absolute nonsense, I can say it way better'. And then we have this precedent of all these Black Trans people who are making better work than we were before.

Flatness: Within that I hear a call for more critical voices and yeah, for people to feel that they can speak up.

Danielle: Yeah, because I feel like the art world makes people individuals, but actually we're doing what we do because of people around us, you know like Sola [Olulode] makes work because of the people that she sees, and she wants to store in her paintings. And when someone tells me their experience, I see that as like a theoretical piece that has been told to me. How do we store that? I just want to hear more and more. I wish there was a Black Trans library.

Flatness: There will be, there will be. That was also a question I had; you're making a *How to Be a Trans Mother* archive (see Figure 2). How's it going?

Danielle: I mean no one's picked [it] up yet. It would be a really cool archive or a book or something.

Flatness: It does look like a book cover.

Danielle: I mean it was designed like that. It was designed like a game cover, actually. But maybe if I get another show that's what I'll pitch. I hope I still have it. I accidentally deleted thirty gigs of my work yesterday. Yeah, that's fine, it happens. I'm so used to losing work it's like I'm not even fazed by it anymore.

Flatness: That was the kind of the point of my interview as well. How do you archive? How do you backup all of your stuff?

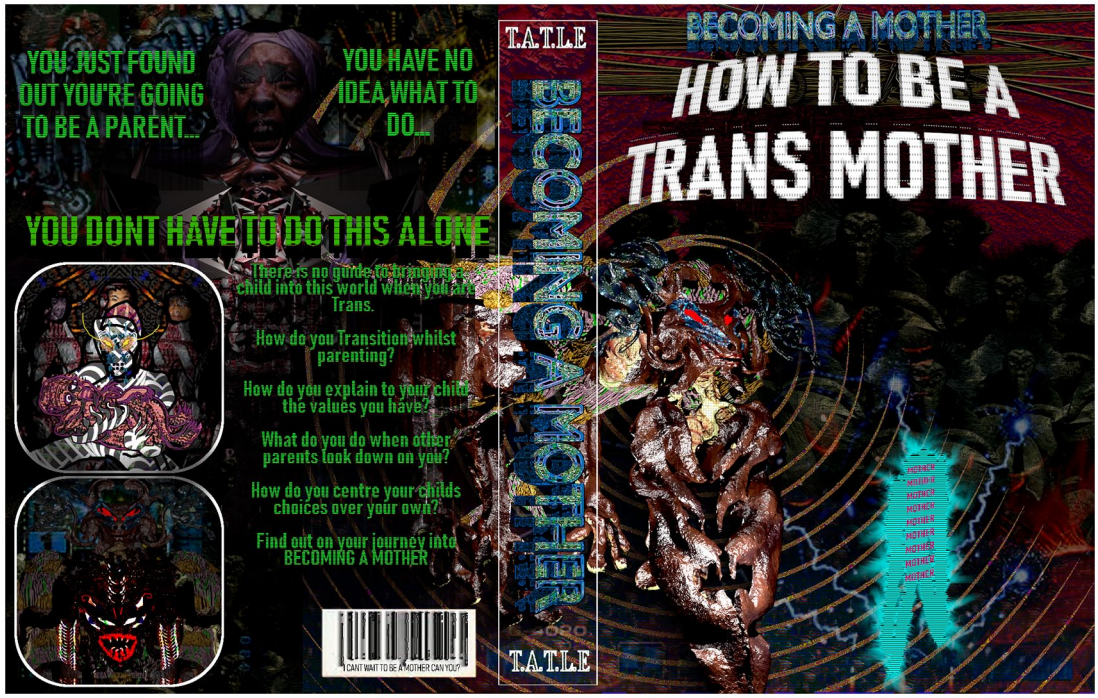
YOU JUST FOUND OUT YOU'RE GOING TO BE A PARENT...
YOU HAVE NO IDEA WHAT TO DO...
YOU DONT HAVE TO DO THIS ALONE
There is no guide to bringing a child into this world when you are Trans.
How do you Transition whilst parenting?
How do you explain to your child the values you have?
What do you do when other parents look down on you?
How do you centre your childs choices over your own?
Find out on your journey into BECOMING A MOTHER
I CANT WAIT TO BE A MOTHER CAN YOU?
T.A.T.L.E
BECOMING A MOTHER
T.A.T.L.E
BECOMING A MOTHER
HOW TO BE A TRANS MOTHER

Figure 2 *How to Be a Trans Mother* (work in progress), 2020 by Danielle Brathwaite-Shirley
Source: Image courtesy of the artist

Danielle: I backup everything that's very important. I back it up about 50,000 times. So I have it in two different clouds in a hard drive and in two different computers. So all the stuff I deleted was kind of like, just stuff I had made. If someone was making archives of my work, or just my practice, it might be useful, but I mean it's gone now. I am very used to it. That happens when you work in digital stuff, things just disappear, which is why I'm trying to make something more permanent. I'm talking to the Science Gallery about conservation and we're looking at different ways like the Wayback Machine. How can we use conservation to make an artwork, but at the same time conserve that work? What does that look like? Is it blockchains? I mean blockchains are very bad for the environment. So what is it? How do you conserve a Nintendo 64 game, exactly the same conversation? Is it an emulator, because if you have an emulator, you can run an emulator in any case. So is it that, or do we build the console to play the game? So there's a lot of stuff we could do, but it just takes time, money and resources to actually do them, which is really annoying. Right now they all just live on hard drives.

Flatness: I like the idea of building a console to play it, but I guess there always needs to be somebody who knows how to fix it if anything goes wrong, right?

Danielle: Right. That's the thing. I want to know how all the infrastructure works—what I mean by infrastructure is from the code to the voice acting. I want it to be all Black and Trans so that we know how to fix it, so we don't need to hire in someone like Apple to come in and help us fix something. So I need us to understand the workings, but we're not there—definitely not. It's important for us to know how all the decisions were made and who made all the decisions so that we can tell when erasure

VISITORS PASS
THIS BADGE GRANTS YOU ACCESS TO THE TOUR
YOU ARE EITHER A
TRANS TOURIST
BLACK CULTURE TOURIST
OR A "SOCIALLY CONSCIOUS" TOURIST
ON THIS TOUR YOU MAY FEEL:
GUILT, ANGER, ENTITLEMENT,
CONFUSION, FUSTRATION
BE RESPONSIBLE FOR YOUR EMOTIONS

Figure 3 *Visitor Pass* (animated GIF), 2020 by Danielle Brathwaite-Shirley
Source: Image courtesy of the artist

could happen, because for me something about archives is that the person who decides what to archive is the same person who creates pieces of erasure within the archive.

Flatness: Can you say what freedom on the internet means to you? Like, you've said that you're not into NFTs and that kind of marketisation of digital artwork.

Danielle: Well, I don't know if I'm not into NFTs; that place is not accessible. So basically, the people who are making money on NFTs now are mainly white. And usually what happens is that a market like this crops up and doesn't survive for long. Maybe this one will; we'll see. But most people making the millions of pounds will be white people. I got invited recently to an NFT site, but what I needed was an invite from an artist who had sold a piece of work, then I need to create an Ethereum wallet, then I need a Twitter [account]. And so, it's linked to all these things that limit accessibility. And the only reason I got into it was because I was like, give me an invite, I don't know what this is, I need to see. You know I'm working in a digital field, literally, and how are people making money from Blender files when I haven't sold anything ever? And for me this is it: who can make money, who is worth something and who isn't worth something just because of who they are. It's usually a dealer that says this white person is worth money. And this white person says but this other white person is worth money, and so all the people in that network become worth something. So now we're seeing all these people trying to do NFT hustles: people have been trying to sell NFTs for a very long time, but only recently you can sell concepts rather than how good your artwork is. I'm interested in what this market is doing, and how can I bring Black people into

this market, and make sure it doesn't stay with white people. I don't know if I'll even get into the market, we'll see, but it's a very weird thing.

Danielle: I mean the art world is getting less and less free now. For me there's all these, like, terms and conditions that you have to abide by, like, so if you're on YouTube, you can't say the word Coronavirus or you won't get paid for your video anymore. If you're on Instagram you can't show your nipples because Instagram doesn't want to see your nipples. Or, if you say anything like Black Lives Matter, they could ban your account. They say you're doing terrorist activity. They will have these terms or conditions which they live by and can change based on the individual. There's this crackdown on people wanting to know who everyone is on the internet at all times, and how they can make things more lucrative; it's all about money, always. These terms and conditions limit what we can do because of money, and because of advertisements and because of cookies and because of malware and things that need to be installed onto us, so they can advertise to us better. And so, when I think about freedom of the internet I think about us getting away from the browsers that we currently use and using browsers that have a terms and conditions that are much more clear and enable us to help people just by searching; I mean Google makes a ton of money just by searching. But if you use other search engines, sometimes they plant trees, or sometimes they donate to other people. I think it's time for us to look at the kind of search engines we're using as a form of gaining that freedom.

Flatness: I was never a gamer, but I really responded to something you said recently about how customising avatars can 'make an existence you want to feel possible'.[1]

Danielle: Yeah, so those character customisation things let you feel a type of freedom in creating your character but at the same time it's so hard because within the character customisation there's only a set number of parameters you can change. And so in the earlier ones you would have like five different hairs, four different skin tones, five t-shirts, three jeans and some shoes. Nowadays, some have more, but you can see who has made this game by the character customisation engines. So, for example, EverQuest, if you want to be a Black person you could be a Black person with an unrealistic-sized forehead. And so there's like these limitations in the freedom of your choices within these engines, within these parameters that we currently have. And it's why I wanted to get into making my own games. I wanted to see myself reflected so if there's any limitation I wanted to limit those who are not like me, rather than those who are. I think that's the same mentality that they have when they're making these games. I'm not seeing those around me reflected so when I make my games I'm trying to reflect those people specifically.

Flatness: Thank you. I think my point was that [customisation] is a way of taking yourself out of your present body; the idea of internet freedom that you could be anyone online. That is so far from my experience with it now: identity politics makes you verify and verify this [present] body over again.

Danielle: Yeah, I was having this conversation with someone the other day, as part of this group [where] we play games and we talk about them. It's called The New Design Congress and we were talking about why some people are drawn to creating characters that are exactly like them and other people were creating characters that look nothing like them. And someone explained they wanted to create a character to look exactly like them because they wanted to be the one experiencing those things.

[1] Pixel Therapy Podcast, 'Episode 12: Archiving the past and building Black Trans futures with Danielle Brathwaite-Shirley', https://pixeltherapypod.com/blog/danielle-brathwaite-shirley/ [last accessed 10 April 2021].

Someone else said I wanted to make a character that looks nothing like me because I wanted to have an essence of me, but live a life that I don't, and it's that character's experience not mine. That's just a really good conversation because I don't think it's as cut and dry as we think [...] When I played the game *Dragon's Dogma*, because you create two characters, I made one that reflects how I looked, and one that reflected how I wanted to look. That game held my transness, because as I played the game, I felt like I was going on the journey to become who I wanted to be. You have a lot of things to think about when you think about why people role-play online, including the benefit of role-playing during a game session where you learn about yourself and what you are escaping. To be honest, I think we can have like a whole two-hour discussion about this.

Flatness: I think it's really interesting in relation to transness in particular. I kind of wish I was into it, now I think it's too late ...

Danielle: It's never too late!

Flatness: Maybe, if I find the right game. What was that game you just said?

Danielle: *Dragon's Dogma*. It has got a really good character customisation, amazing.

Flatness: Was it made by Trans people?

Danielle: No, no, none of these games are. The only game I know made by Trans people, what's it called? I think there's one called *Valhalla* and there's one called *Celeste*. There's one called *The Detective Game*. It's so good. I remember now. There's one called *The Missing* [*The Missing: J.J. Macfield and the Island of Memories*], which is made by a system developer, but the writing was done in association with Trans women who helped him write it.

Flatness: You wanted me to ask you about ARGs?

Danielle: ARGs are Augmented Reality Games. They are games that use the entire internet, I mean the entirety, as the engine to run the game. It makes much more sense if you YouTube it and watch one. But essentially, an ARG may start from a YouTube video—doesn't have to, but it could—and it will have a link to a Twitter that is run by someone who is playing a role as maybe someone called James. ARGs never say they're fake; to play an ARG you have to realise it's a game. So, this Twitter will say these other things and maybe link to a website that's a fake dating app you have to play to find these other things and essentially they are huge puzzles that use the internet as its medium. They pretend everything is completely real, no matter how ridiculous it is.

Some of them make a false advert, and get the false advert played as an advert and then they embed the link—there's one that was about pizza—and then you go to the pizza website and it's actually a website about cults displayed as a pizza website. And the idea is to try and figure out what's happening in this cult.

Flatness: I think it's only a matter of time before these forms you're describing are recognised as art.

author biographies

Flatness (Shama Khanna) is an independent curator, writer and educator from London. They are the founder of *Flatness* (http://flatness.eu), a long-running platform for artists' moving image and network

culture. The project has been described as a 'digital site of resistance' (Dr Sylvia Theuri), decentring narratives of the arts and normalcy from the margins of the online. As well as the artists featured on the site, Khanna has collaborated with publications and organisations including: *Afterall*; *NANG*; *Art Monthly*; LUX; Jerwood Arts; Herbert Gallery; The Women's Art Library, Goldsmiths; Manchester University (all UK); documenta 14, Athens; Moderna Museet, Malmö; Western Front, Vancouver; LIMA and Rietveld Academie in Amsterdam. Khanna is a lecturer in Curating at the Royal College of Art and a Trustee of not/nowhere artist workers' co-operative.

Danielle Brathwaite-Shirley (UK) is an artist working predominantly in animation, sound, performance and Video Games to communicate the experiences of being a Black Trans person. Their practice focuses on recording the lives of Black Trans people, intertwining lived experience, fiction and interactivity to create work that refuses to let viewers be passive. The work is often seen as a form of autonomous archiving in which the experience shifts and moulds based on the identity of the user as well as the choices they make during the experiences.